

A Sermon by the Rev. David S. Heald

St. Nicholas Episcopal Church, Scarborough

September 21, 2014

Second Sunday of Creation Season: Year A

Genesis 3:14-19; 4:8-16; Ps. 139:7-12; Romans 5:12-17; Matthew 12:38-40

For thousands of folks in Maine, it's a rite of passage, a sure sign of the change of seasons from summer to autumn, a harvest festival. I speak of the Common Ground Fair, annually drawing over 60,000 visitors, taking place this weekend in Unity.

I regret that I will miss the Fair this year, all that colorful pageant of life, that celebration of the abundant blessings of the earth! Not to mention all that delicious, fresh food—the tantalizing smell of it wafting over the fair grounds.

The Fair is the creation of MOFGA, the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association. Founded in 1971, it's the largest and oldest state organic association in the country. MOFGA's mission is to illuminate the connection between healthful food and environmentally sound farming and gardening practices.

Maine is a pioneer of such practices and I am delighted that St. Nick's, and the people of Scarborough, will have a share in partaking of the blessings of the earth for the sustenance of those most in need.

The Scarborough Garden for the Community is the work of Project Grace whose mission it is both to identify those in need and those willing to share their gifts—an interchange of compassion and care.

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On Friday, I spoke with the executive director of Project Grace, Steffi Cox. I asked her how the idea of the Scarborough Garden evolved and what it meant to her personally.

She reminded me that, shortly after she became executive director, she hosted a series of open conversations in the community. One of those conversations took place at St. Nick's.

Out of those conversations arose three priorities that evolved from an awareness of basic human needs: a need to stay warm, a need to eat healthful food, and a need to feel loved.

It is unconscionable, Steffi said, that in the midst of the earth's abundance, people go hungry. It reminded me of a quote by the President of Tanzania on the MOFGA website: *When people go hungry, it is not food that is short, but justice.*

At the heart of the garden project, Steffi says, is a shared sense of purpose in working toward a common goal—feeding the hungry. She reflected on the odd, sometimes off-putting, configuration of the town of Scarborough. Many people have asked her: where's the town center?

And her answer: the town center is not a geographical location. Wherever we gather for a shared purpose, there we are community, and there is our center, our

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heart. The garden will be such a center of community, a common heart in caring for those in need.

The garden, she said, may be described in one word: *love*.

Already, the effort to create a garden has brought together disparate organizations and institutions in Scarborough and beyond—not only local congregations, several banks, and various businesses providing services at no or reduced cost, but the Scarborough Garden Club, the Scarborough Food Pantry, Cumberland County Master Gardeners, and Kitchen Gardeners International.

Already there is renewed energy around working toward a common cause.

When I had lunch with Bishop Lane in August, I told him about the garden project. He was thrilled. He was thrilled because this kind of project—this mission initiative—dovetails with his vision for the Diocese of Maine, a vision he set forth shortly after he came to us and that he has been promoting—and working toward collaboratively—for years.

In his landmark 2010 convention address, he offered a snapshot of the very mixed picture that is the Diocese of Maine, a handful of congregations are growing, many in decline. And he presented us with a challenge:

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*If I asked you, today, to describe the **default future** of your congregation or of the Episcopal Church, you could describe it to me in some detail...*

As I hear clergy and lay leaders talking about the default future of their congregations, it is some version of a story of inevitable decline and loss, of a courageous community of people

trying very hard to sustain important ministries with inadequate financial resources, of congregations succumbing to the losses associated with aging members.

*What we need, really, is **new language**, a new conversation, that can help us describe a future different from the default future, language that compels us to speak of a church different from the one we know - the one that's in inevitable decline. We need to talk about our life in a different way.*

Where's the frontline in your church? Where does your congregation engage with the spiritual malaise, the moral ambivalence, the selfishness and greed of our society?

Where's the frontline?....

Is the line inside the church? Is it at the front door? Is it at the edge of the church property? Is it some place in your community?

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*If you know where the front line is, if you can identify that, what would it take to **move** the front line? More important, what would it take for you to **commit** to moving the front line?*

How would you move the field of operations from inside the building to the people downtown or the people hidden in the countryside?

The Scarborough Garden at St. Nick's offers us an unprecedented opportunity to move our front line from our own front door into the heart of the community, to a place where, together with friends and strangers, we may work toward a common goal with a common heart—feeding the hungry.

It is yet another way to realize that vocation set forth in the second chapter of Genesis, when God places humanity in the midst of the garden, to till and keep it—to share in God's work of blessing and healing, to offer sustenance from the produce of the earth.

We often talk at St. Nick's about the need to grow in numbers—the more members we have, the better able we will be to sustain ourselves financially. In this need, we are not unique nor are we alone.

Almost every congregation in the Diocese of Maine struggles with the same issue, many struggle far more than do we. One congregation after another, it seems,

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especially in the rural areas of our state, face the prospect of having to close its doors.

I would offer that, not only do we need to grow upward, as it were, in numbers, but even more importantly, we need to grow outward and downward.

We need to come down to earth—grounding ourselves in worship and prayer, grounding ourselves in a community of compassion and care, grounding ourselves in the gifts of this earth and of this place we have been given to till and tend in love. AMEN